

Podcast Episode 26: Aira – Making Transit More Accessible for Those Who are Blind or Have Low Vision
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Host:

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Guests:

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Nyema Pinkney Cranford, Global Continuous Improvement Manager, Collins Aerospace and an Aira user since 2016

Podcast Transcript:

Hi, I'm Rich Andreski, Bureau Chief for public transportation at the Connecticut Department of Transportation, and I'd like to welcome you to Along the Lines, a podcast series where we will explore our current issues and ideas on Connecticut's public transportation system.

Welcome to another episode of Along the Lines. I'm your host Rich Andreski. Access to Connecticut's extensive public transportation system is vital to each, and every one of our fellow residents. But for those who are blind or have low vision, that access may seem daunting. Whether it's getting people to work, schools, medical appointments, shopping, or just getting people connected to family and friends, the Connecticut DOT is committed to giving all of our riders access to our public transportation services. October 15th was Blind Americans Equality Day. On that date, we launched a pilot program offering free virtual mobility assistance to provide access and independence to those that are blind or have low vision. The Aira pilot program is a collaboration between the Connecticut Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration and the Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services and is administered by the Connecticut Transportation Institute at the University of Connecticut.

Joining me today to talk about this important program are Jenine Stanley, Director of Customer Communications of Aira and Nyema Pinkney Cranford, a Global Continuous Improvement Manager for Collins Aerospace, and an Aira user since 2016. Jenine and Nyema, welcome to the show.

Thank you, Rich. Thank you.

So glad you could join me. And before we jump into those hard-hitting questions, can each of you introduce yourselves a bit more and tell our listeners a little bit about what you do in your role in this program?

Sure. I'll go ahead and start. I'm Jenine Stanley and I am our Director of Customer Communications at Aira, which means I handle our social media and customer forums and all of our different communication media that we find ourselves on reaching out to our customers, which is quite interesting because I started out as a customer of Aira in 2017.

Jenine, thank you for that. Really gonna be interested to hear your personal experience with Aira as we have this conversation.

Nyema, what about you?

Thanks Rich. Good afternoon, my name is Nyema Pinkney Cranford and I am a Global Continuous Improvement Manager for the supply chain at Collins Aerospace. In my role, I have an opportunity to work with our businesses and processes, not parts, but processes, to ensure we reach efficiencies to meet the needs of our customers and every plane that's in the air has something on it that we've designed and made so there's a vast opportunity to look at processes and how we can operate best as an integrated supply chain. I'm glad to be here, thanks for having me.

Nyema, thank you so much for making time for us. Great, great to have you on the program. So, if we could, let's jump in and talk a little bit about Aira. Perhaps, Jenine, you could start us out by describing for our listeners how Aira works and explain what visual interpretation service is.

Absolutely Rich. Aira is, as you said, a visual interpreting service and what that means is we take technology in the form of a smartphone app that is available on the iOS and Android platforms and using the back facing camera of the app, we have trained professional agents, we call them agents, they are actually Visual Interpreters is their more formal title. They are able, to basically be the eyes for a person who's needing some visual information to complete a task. And that can be anything from reading, from helping to navigate a complicated building, from watching down the street for that next bus to come up and make sure it's the right one, etcetera. So, there are a number of different uses for Aira out there.

It's fascinating when I've learned about Aira that it's not an automated server. We're so used to right now talking to chat bots and automated answering services, but Aira is really you're connecting with live agents on the other side. So, can you talk about these agents and what users can expect from them?

Absolutely. The real key to Aira is our people, and these are the agents, the visual interpreters who go through extensive training to learn how blind people move, the language that blind people use to describe their environment and to get directions and give directions actually as well, so these particular agents are out there. They also learn things like computer tasks that someone may have difficulty with, looking for things in a document that someone might need edited. The agents are all over the country, in fact, all over the world, there's about 20% of our agents are military spouses.

It's amazing how technology has allowed us to work together and collaborate across hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. Pretty phenomenal times we live in.

Absolutely.

Nyema, over to you. You know, it's always a pleasure to have the opportunity to talk with people who use our public transportation system day in and day out. And so, I'm wondering if you can share with our listeners a little bit about the obstacles you may have faced in the past and how Aira might help you going forward?

Sure, thanks Rich. When I lost my vision in 20...it was 2007, Aira wasn't around at that time and I was determined to keep my sense of independence and navigating my way, and I found it extremely difficult to take public buses in areas that didn't have a lot of people to ask information. And I actually did board an incorrect bus once, the pride in me didn't let me ask. I knew where I was supposed to be, and it was the right time and I jumped on the bus and got ready to grab a seat and just thought, I'd better double check and I had gotten on the wrong bus. So, some of the barriers are in identifying the proper buses to

board, where you should be boarding those buses, the safety of the area around where you're boarding public transportation, understanding if there's other traffic that's around you, and making sure that you have correct change or the proper documentation. All of those things are really important to have a smooth travel experience and when you are low vision or blind, sometimes that can be very frustrating and when you ask people, you're always at the mercy of their time, availability, and kindness and you don't always receive the best assistance. So, Aira has definitely empowered me to feel more confident of taking public transportation, whether it's the ADA paratransit, where they can help me to look for my drivers, to understand where the buses, especially during holiday travel when is extremely crowded, or when I am looking to take the bus or a train someplace, they can help assist me when there's bustling around, where people are trying to get to and fro and don't necessarily have the time to offer assistance.

You know, one of the special treats of getting to host this program is getting to talk to customers who use our service and your story, Nyema, is a very personal story and we have requirements, as I'm sure you're aware, that we have to follow to make our system accessible. But my attitude and view is that we really, those are those are sort of the bare minimums and that whenever we can improve access and doing away that's customer friendly we should be doing it. And that this isn't about a set of minimums or a set of you know regulations per say, but that you know the focus really needs to be on you, and every other customer that, you know, may have different needs out there. So, you probably have some of the longest experience with Aira in terms of, you know, being a customer of Aira. What has been your experience so far? You know, with those agents over the years, can you give us some examples.

Absolutely. One of my most favorite things is being in an airport. The Aira agents have helped me find everything from a cup of tea, the restroom, a newsstand, my gate. Or when I am traveling using a ADA paratransit to a grocery store and I've had a couple of experiences with the grocery stores that haven't necessarily been optimal, but the drivers for transit always make sure I get to the door, get in and get close to someone who can assist me. But with my Aira, I'm ready to take off. I'm like, I know that they can help me navigate this system so I can do my own shopping. A lot of times when I'm looking for items, they have the capability of being able to scan the aisle for me and zoom in to help me locate things. And it really is a quality of life improvement, working with the agents. And they're so knowledgeable they take time to be very descriptive and to make sure that they're describing in a way that is usable for whatever level the end user is. So, if you're looking for a lot of detail, they'll give you that. If you're looking for minimum details, they'll provide that. And that's the same way using public transportation. If you need them to give you every detail about your environment, they can provide that and it really makes you feel safer, but it also makes you feel smarter. You're learning to travel smarter, and that makes you experience better for everyone.

Nyema, thank you for sharing that. And Jenine, what a testimonial.

Absolutely. I definitely could not have said it better myself. And having had so many of those experiences that Nyema described, I can absolutely second what she's saying.

Well, I know I had a had a chance to talk with you Jenine and your colleagues at Aira recently. And I remember we were waiting for everyone to gather and we were having a just an open conversation over a conference call and I could hear how powerfully descriptive your team was about describing things. If they use such colorful language in a really neat and engaging way. Very, very descriptive. The rest of us don't necessarily talk that way, right? We are not accustomed to describing everything we're seeing in a

conversation, but it was really very cool. Can you talk a little bit about how that works? I mean it just for those who may not be able yet to grasp exactly what Aira is doing, it's literally translating the world around you into language, is that a fair way to say it?

That is a very fair way to say it, Rich. A lot of the training that our agents go through is to describe things and most people who succeed in our agent process, and it is a process, of around 15,000 applications we've had over the years we take maybe 1% of them, so it's quite an arduous process to become an agent and part of that is learning how to describe and being able to describe things around you. And you know, if you think of it being on the telephone before we all had our mobile phones with cameras and things, we would describe things to each other. You know, on the phone, as you were telling about a family incident or a family gathering or something, you know, and you would describe that. I think we've all gotten away from that with all the visual stimulation that we have. But this is something our agents do, and it really broadens, you know, someone experience.

You know it is in some way an art form that is on the wane and it's exciting and fantastic that this is now available to individuals who may need it and it's in their pocket. It's not a complicated service, it's a mobile app and we're really, really excited about the partnership that we've started here and really hoping to learn from this. So, the goal for our pilot phase of this project over 18 months is to really hear from both of you, and others like yourselves, that are using the services and is it working? And should this be a longer-term service that we offer our customers that that ride public transportation?

So right, I just wanted to say here you are breaking ground nationally by being able to even engage in a pilot like this that is really groundbreaking and we're excited to be working with you.

So yes, stay tuned for more. We're just, you know, we'll be getting some information. We'll be doing periodic surveys to gauge interest and to make sure it's working as intended for our customers. But yeah, it's certainly something we would love to offer a long term. So, you know, I guess those who may be listening again may want to go check out Aira. So Jenine, can you describe, I guess, first for someone who maybe just curious about Aira, where should they go to learn more? And then if someone's interested in signing up for Aira, how do they do that?

Absolutely. So, if you are just curious, our app is free. You are welcome to download it. You can go to our home page, which has just been updated so we're excited to roll that out for everyone and that is: www.aira.io and there is a link up at the top in the navigation bar that says 'download and try it' and if you go to that page you are going to see a link for the Google Play Store and the Apple App Store whichever meets your needs and it will take you right there to go ahead and download the app. And of course, you probably want to access that on your phone, not your computer, but it will take you right to our location in those app stores. You can download the app, sign in with a phone number, and then you can take-a-look around. You can try it out. We have a short trial period. We also have a 15 minute demo where you can see how it works. And then we're also happy to work with you through our customer care team. If you are either having difficulty or you just want to, you know, say, OK, what can I do with this? I don't know what to do.

Thank you for that. I would encourage everyone to go check it out, very exciting at a minimum, go ahead and check out that website and so I always like to talk about those that listen to this program, know that I'm very excited about the use of technology, not just for the sake of technology, but how it improves people's lives. And so, I'm wondering, this question goes out to both Jenine and Nyema, could both of

you talk a little bit about where you see technology going in terms of aiding persons who are blind or have low vision? Where do we go from here? What developments in technology excite you most?

I'll let Nyema take this one.

Nyema, do you want to go first?

Sure, I do believe that Aira has definitely turned up the heat on possibility. I did not imagine in 2007 that I'd be in a space where I could have a tool with me that could see and describe things to me. I see that becoming more that type of technology, becoming more of the norm, including the opportunity to use an eyeglass, of similar to the eyeglass that was used previously with Aira, to give people freedom in range where they're connected indefinitely. I think that there is technology out there that is already being developed that will help as far as visual technology and depending on the site loss, to help use cameras to be able to help improve vision and things like that. So, I think those are realistic things that we'll see improve overtime. Obviously stem cell technology and things like that that will help eyesight when you have a permanent eye loss is a long way down the road. But the need for it, I think, is becoming more prominent because of computer use and blue lights and eye strain for a lot of the population, whereas a low vision and blind citizens used to be a very small in number because of technology, that number is increasing and I think that visibility is going to help push the conversation about general usage and more applicability for these tools and technologies across the general population as time moves on. So, I think we'll see new devices especially at things like the CSUN conference where I learned about Aira in 2016 at the CSUN Conference. I think places like that will continue to push the dialogue. And we'll see new things come forward.

Thank you Nyema, very exciting. Yeah, sometimes the future is hard to imagine, but we are living in many ways in the future right now, aren't we?

Yeah, Jenine. I mean, thoughts on technology and where technology might, you know, further improve lives.

Sure. I think we're finally getting to the point, Rich, where we're asking of people who develop technology, you know, what do people really need to complete the picture of inclusion and technologies like Aira, things like Lidar, which is finally coming to the mainstream in some of the phones and things like that, these are all things that are filling those needs, you know, like being able to get the assistance you need from a live person whenever you need it, not when it's convenient for somebody else. I think artificial intelligence is going to play a bigger and bigger role and that can be a little scary at times, and I think we have to really be cognizant of the role that that's going to play. It's part of our name, the AI in our name stands for artificial intelligence, and the rest is remote assistance and being able to use that machine, learning in a way that benefits everyone. Right now, we use it for scheduling, for looking at common tasks and ways that we can improve things, etc, who knows what we're gonna be using it for in the future?

Well said. Yeah artificial intelligence and machine learning are certainly the hot new technology across many industries. And Yep, no doubt we're going to see more of that in public transportation and certainly visual services for persons who are blind or have low vision. So, excited to see where that's taking us in the in the years ahead.

So Jenine, if someone's interested in Connecticut and they want to get involved, can you tell the listeners how they can do that?

Absolutely. So you first are going to download the Aira app and get yourself all set up, signed in, and at the top of our home screen, just above the big call Aira button in the middle, there's a button that says apply a free access offer. You're gonna tap on that and in the Android app that's going to be in the navigation drawer, and you're going to go in there and take a look at the promotions and you'll see state of CT in there. You're gonna double tap on that and there will be a link to go to a survey. And that's how you get into the project. Once you've completed that survey, we'll send you a confirmation code. You put that into the app and then you are in, you're in the Connecticut project and you are able to take advantage of some of the additional features that Connecticut residents get to take advantage of what this project. The really exciting thing though is that anybody using public transit in Connecticut, whether you're a visitor or whatever, you're going to get to make use of Aira in the public transit system, because all of those locations are geofenced. And so when you come in to say a bus terminal, train terminal, whatever you may have, even a ferry landing, you are going to get a notification on the app that says, this is a free Aira access location and away you go.

Thank you for that, really exciting. I hope those who may benefit from this service go ahead and check it out and take advantage. It's there for your benefit. I'd like to change gears now and just talk for a moment about how has Aira helped you in your personal lives? Both Jenine and Nyema, and maybe we'll start with you and Nyema, can you tell us a personal story of how you've used Aira and how it's helped improve your life?

Glad to do it, Rich. My company provided the opportunity for me to take classes for diversity and inclusion at Cornell's campus in New York City and I take the ADA paratransit to work. I'm considered a heavy user when I commute into the office, it's 100% of my transportation. When I'm grocery shopping, all of my errands and things like that are done using the paratransit or the public bus system. And I take the shuttle to the bus station using Aira. Aira helped me ensure that I actually, in Hartford you know it's bus and train combined, to make sure I can get to the right place for my train platform. I used it to take the train. When I got off the train at the Port Authority, I used it again to get a taxicab and to get to my hotel. When I got to my hotel and got checked in, I used Aira to find my hotel room, put my bags down and then use Aira to go and find a place for dinner. And then the following morning, I use Aira to actually walk to the campus where I took my classes. So, it's a life tool, it's a quality of life tool, not just something I consider on my smartphone, that I can just pull out sometimes. I actually think it can be integrated into every aspect of life and it has been for me. For fun, for travel, for reading, recipes, all of those things and the agents really want to see you succeed. And I have celebrated with a few of the agents when I have gotten a good recipe, or I've been able to get a plane ticket. They've helped me order Uber, to travel around when I'm in unfamiliar places. It really is like having someone with me and that is safety as well as peace of mind. So, it is a tool that I think everyone can benefit, it's just how you choose to use it. And one agent actually told me, because I was going to ask something, and I said, oh, I won't ask I don't think you can do it. They told me never stop looking for ways to use this, the possibilities are endless, and I really think they mean it.

Customer service comes first and no doubt that sounds like the way Aira handles things. So, customer is always first. So Jenine, I mean you, you you're with your organization, but you're also a user of the service. So how has Aira benefited you?

Oh my goodness, where do I start? So, I travel, or did before the pandemic, and getting back into that again and Nyema's description of going to New York it mirrors what I'm gonna be doing in a few weeks with some friends of mine. Going out on a yearly kind of pilgrimage to Manhattan, doing some shopping, doing some eating and a lot of fun things, and we all are blind, so we're all going to be using Aira in previous capacities from adjusting the thermostat in the hotel room, which is often inaccessible, to going down to the Duane Reade right beside the hotel and grabbing some food and beverages and things like that. To actually looking around and saying, OK, where are we gonna go eat? and how do we get there? and what are the COVID restrictions? That's a really huge thing right now. It's just figuring out, OK, are there social distancing marks because boy people, people have been yelled at, accidentally I think in most cases, for actually not being able to know about the social distancing restrictions and things like that, and so I Aira can definitely help with that.

Yeah, interesting times, to say the least. Well, you know, thank you for what you do, Jenine. Not only you know, joining us on the program today, but the fact that your organization is helping improve lives every day. So, thank you for spending a little bit of your time with us.

You're so welcome. It's very humbling actually, Rich.

So, is there anything else that either of you would like to share with our listeners before we wrap up?

Let me give you our 800 number and email to reach us and website and our 800 number is: 1-800-835-1934 and our customer service department is open from 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM and that's Eastern Time they are, actually many of them, are located on the West Coast. Our website is: www.aira.io and you can also email us at: support@aira.io.

Well, thank you so much and Nyema, anything you'd like to add?

Thanks, Rich. Just thank you for having me today. And to everyone who's listening, please, I encourage you to give Aira a chance. You'd be very, very happy with what you've found as a new quality of life tool.

Well, this has been a really fascinating conversation. I've really enjoyed talking with both of you. I know you have busy schedules and do appreciate you making the time to join us on the podcast, and I hope our listeners learned a little bit of something that perhaps they wouldn't have learned otherwise. Thanks once more to our guests, Nyema Pinkney Cranford and Jenine Stanley for joining me today.

Thank you so much, Rich. Thanks for having us.

Thank you for joining us today. Have a great day.

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